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ABSTRACT

To test the hypothesis that use of sexist language in television newscasts cultivates images of women as immature, frivolous, or incompetent, two television news anchors (one male, one female) were asked to tape versions of a news story involving a 28-year-old female lottery winner. In one version, each anchor referred to this female as "woman," in the other they referred to her as "girl." The four experimental treatments (male vs. female broadcaster, sexist vs. nonsexist linguistic choice) were edited into four newscasts by the same anchors. The newscasts were then shown to 95 college students who were randomly assigned to one of the four treatments and who were asked to rate the lottery winner on evaluative, potency, and activity semantic differential scales. Results did not produce a generally sexist language effect. However, female subjects rated the lottery winner higher when she was referred to as "woman," whereas just the opposite was true among male subjects, who rated the female higher when referred to as "girl." Also, subjects who viewed the female anchor rated the lottery winner as more active than did those who viewed the male anchor, raising the question of anchor-related contributions to television news effects. Data tables and figures are appended. (HOD)

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TELEVISION NEWS AND SEXIST LANGUAGE: A STUDY OF TELEVISION NEWS EFFECTS

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Television News and Sexist Language: A Study of Television News Effects

By Randall E. Gebhardt and James D. Harless

Serious questions remain concerning the impact of television news on social issues, including the concern that through sexist language ("chick," "girl," etc.), television news can cultivate sexism by ascribing to females the images of immaturity, frivolity and incompetence.

To test the impact of sexist language in television news, a 2X2X2 factorial experiment was designed in which a news story describing an adult female as either a "girl" or "woman" was shown to 95 college students. Professional male and female co-anchors each taped both versions of the story, which were then edited into an actual newscast. Subjects rated the female referent on evaluative, potency and activity semantic differential scales. A general sexist language effect was not obtained. However, female subjects rated the lottery winner higher when she was referred to as "woman" than when she was referred to as "girl." Just the opposite was true among male subjects, who rated the lottery winner higher when referred to as "girl." The findings support the notion that in American society (as reflected through, perhaps culviated by, television news), there exists an underlying imbalance in the valuation of males and females. The results were also seen as indicative of a critical problem in communication between the sexes.

Also, subjects who viewed the female anchor rated the lottery winner as more active than did those who viewed the male anchor, raising the question of anchor-related contributions to television news effects. Previous findings suggest this contribution may result from the female anchor's perceived attractiveness or expertness relative to the male anchor.

Television News and Sexist Language: A Study of Television News Effects

By Randall E. Gebhardt and James D. Harless

Researchers in broadcast journalism have given considerable attention to the news gatekeeper and factors affecting audience attraction, leaving the question of television's impact on society to those stuyding entertainment rather than news content. While there have been detailed studies of news content, network news treatment of political conventions, and the importance of the news anchor in holding an audience, a significant body of knowledge on the newscast's impact has not been forthcoming.

One reason for the lack of attention to television news effects may be that the problem seems mundane. Common sense teaches that since people pay attention to television news to learn — about the new, the odd, the significant — they must learn from the news. There seems little reason to mount a research effort to see if people do indeed learn from their local newscast, and just what they learn.

Yet, there are important social and political concerns over what the news is teaching. For instance, one criticism has been that television news presents false-to-fact and dysfunctional information regarding the roles of the sexes.[1] Of principal concern have been the cognitive effects of linguistic sexism, such as the use of masculine pronouns in the generic sense ("man" and "mankind" to describe the human race) and use of sexist-oriented terms to describe female adults ("broads," "girls," "chicks"). Both have been said to ascribe to females the images of immaturity, frivolity and incompetence.[2] Linguistic

sexism, it has been argued, establishes a "construct of reality" within which people function in society, influencing the way we perceive, evaluate and behave toward others.[3] Trenholm and Todd-de-Mancillas believe, for instance, the "image of a female person who is described as 'chick' or 'girl' will be different from the image of the same person described as 'woman.'"[4]

The Research

Several studies suggest media presentations can affect perceptions of sex roles. French and McGhee found, for example, that children who viewed television more than 25 hours per week were more likely to hold traditional sex role stereotypes than those who viewed 10 hours or less per week.[5] Drabman, Hammer and Jarvis have shown that non-traditional portrayals of women in television can widen the range of children's perceptions of the roles women are able to hold in society.[6]

To study the impact of sexist language, Schneider and Hacker presented undergraduate students with proposed chapter titles for an impending sociology textbook, either with or without generic masculine pronouns. One chapter was titled either "Social Man" or "Society," another "Political Man" or "Political Behavior." Subjects were asked to match pictures to the titles from a large pool of photographs. Statistical analysis indicated the so-called generic "man" titles produced a significantly greater use of male than female images.[7] Similar studies have corroborated this finding.[8]

Trenholm and Todd-de-Mancillas hypothesized that sexist language affects both the perception of the message referent and the relationship between sender and receiver. Sixty-three (63) undergraduate students were presented with one of two transcripts — one with sexist references, the other without — describing the "personality and physical characteristics of a female acquaintance." Afterward, both male and female students rated those described with sexist descriptions "more attractive" than those described with non-

sexist descriptions. On character scales, males rated women described in sexist terms more favorably, while females rated them less favorably, than women described in non-sexist terms. Analysis of the data revealed a two-way interaction between message and gender of subjects. Men tended either to not differentiate between sexist and non-sexist descriptions (i.e., were insensitive to the sexist/non-sexist linguistic choice), or to denigrate the non-sexist source. Women evaluated the non-sexist source more highly than the sexist source.[9]

In a similar experiement, Dayhoff investigated the effect of linguistic sexism on the perception of male and female political candidates. Candidates and the positions they sought were presented to subjects in sexist or non-sexist written accounts, and the candidates' perceived suitability for the office was measured on semantic differential scales.[10] Dayhoff concluded that sexist language influenced the way people perceived and evaluated competence and acceptable performance. The data indicated that sexist language tended to "heighten and make more salient the gender appropriateness of the elective offices," and "to reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes," causing, generally, "women to be evaluated negatively."[11]

Hypotheses

The present study builds on this resarch by investigating the hypothesis that use of sexist language in television newscasts cultivates images of women as immature, frivolous or incompetent [12], causing women, as Dayhoff and others suggest, to be evaluated negatively. The research and feminist ideology suggest the following hypotheses:

1. Use of sexist language to describe an adult female in a television news story will result in lower perceived status of that female than will use of non-sexist language.

2. Female subjects will be more sensitive to the sexist/non-sexist linguistic choice than male viewers. Specifically, the difference in perceived status between those described with sexist and non-sexist language will be greater for female than male viewers.

Since previous research on the effects of linguistic sexism focused on print media, the gender of message source has not been considered. The present study of television news effects allows investigation of the interaction of gender of message source with the experimental effects hypothesized in (1) and (2). A general view of some in the feminist community and the Trenholm and Todd-de-Mancillas research suggest the following exploratory hypothesis:

3. The impact of sexist language will be affected by gender of the news anchor.

Method

The experimental design was a 2X2X2 factorial analysis: female vs. male broadcaster, female vs. male participant, sexist vs. non-sexist treatment.

To test the hypothesis in the context of a television newscast, two Columbus, Ohio, television news anchors (one male, one female) were asked to videotape two versions of a news story involving a 28-year-old female.[13] In one version, each anchor referred to this adult female as "girl;" in the other they referred to her as "woman." The story read as follows:

> THERE'S ONE HAPPY ("GIRL" OR "WOMAN") IN PENNSYLVANIA TONIGHT — NOT TO MENTION RICH. IN FACT, TWENTY-EIGHT-YEAR OLD JULIE ANDERSON WOUND UP WITH THE ONLY WINNING TICKET IN PENNSYLVANIA'S BIGGEST LOTTERY EVER — NINE POINT TWO MILLION DOLLARS. SHE'S BEEN A SCHOOL TEACHER FOR THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, AND NOW...WELL, SHE SAYS IT'S TIME TO RETIRE AND DO A LITTLE TRAVELING WITH ("THE GIRLS" OR "HER FRIENDS"). WHAT WILL SHE DO WITH ALL HER MONEY. WELL, THE PITTSBURG ("GIRL" OR "WOMAN") SAYS SHE'D LIKE TO SAVE A LITTLE...AND WITH A YEARLY CHECK OF THREE HUNDRED FIFTY THOUSAND DOLLARS, SHE'LL HAVE NO TROUBLE AT ALL.

The four experimental treatments (male vs. female broadcaster, sexist vs. non-sexist linguistic choice) were edited into an actual newscast by the same anchors the same evening. The experimental tape presentation ran a total of two minutes and 20 seconds. Subjects were shown one of the four videotape segments, each of which had the same story order and included one version of the 30 second lottery story. The stories used to fill out the treatment were real news stories without sexist references.

The subjects were 95 sociology students at The Ohio State University. They were randomly assigned to one of four treatments. After viewing the news segment, subjects rated various persons presented in the treatment (including the female lottery winner) on semantic differential scales representing each of the three dimensions of semantic differential technique: Evaluative, Potency and Activity.

The semantic differential scales chosen to represent each of these dimensiones were:

Evaluative: good vs. bad, ineffective vs. effective, unsuccessful vs. successful, mature vs. immature, incompetent vs. competent;

Potency: strong vs. weak, serious vs. humorous, soft vs. hard;

Activity: quick vs. slow, passive vs. active, calm vs. excitable.

Within each of these dimensions, the scales were summed and averaged across subjects within each treatment group. Thus, for each dimension, eight means were obtained, representing the 2X2X2 matrix: female vs. male broadcaster, female vs. male subject, "girl" vs. "woman" word choice. These means were compared using a three-way analysis of variance.

Results

Ninety-two (92) subjects completed the semantic differential scales as required. The group means for the semantic differential evaluative, potency and activity scales are reported in Tables 1-6.

As indicated by Table 2, a significant two-way interaction is seen between sex of subject and "girl" vs. "woman" word choice on the evaluative scale. Figure 1 reveals the nature of this interaction. Among female viewers, the lottery winner was evaluated higher when referred to as "woman" than when referred to as "girl." Just the opposite was true among male viewers, who evaluated the lottery winner higher when she was referred to as "girl" than when she was referred to as "woman."

As seen in Table 4, no significant effects were obtained in the Potency dimension.

However, Table 6 shows a significant main effect was obtained in the Activity dimension for sex of broadcaster. Specifically, as seen in Figure 3, subjects who viewed the female anchor rated the lottery winner as more-active than did those who viewed the male anchor.

Hypothesis (1) is supported in part. Use of the term "girl" in reference to a female adult in television news resulted in that female being rated lower on evaluative scales, but only among female viewers. Hypothesis (1) is not supported among male viewers, nor is it supported on potency and activity semantic differential scales.

Thus, a general sexist language effect did not obtain.

Hypotheses (2) and (3) are not supported.

Discussion

As indicated in Figure 1, female viewers rated the female lottery winner higher on evaluative scales when she was called "woman" than when she was called "girl." In contrast, male viewers rated the lottery winner higher when she was described as "girl." This finding seems consistent with those of Trenholm and Todd-de-Mancillas, who found males perceived female adults referred to as "girls" as being more attractive and of higher character than those referred to as "woman."

The many possible uses of the terms "girl" and "woman" make it difficult to propose a causal relationship between these two words and the perception of a lower status for their referent. (Preliminary investigation indicates, for example, that use of the terms "boy" and "girl" is vastly different in black culture than in dominant culture.) But, the results here do give further support for the notion that use of certain language patterns, including the use of particular words, can affect the perceived status of female adults, with the effect contingent on gender of message receiver.

It is clear, too, that there may be a perplexing and continuing communication problem between men and women (especially college men and women). Semanticist William Haney discusses bypassing, a "miscommunication pattern which occurs when the sender (speaker, writer) and the receiver (listener, reader) miss each other with their meanings."[14] Words are seen only as variables which are "fixed" by individuals during the communication process. Bypassing often occurs when words are fixed differently by communicators.

It is apparent that the men in this experiment are fixing the variable ("girl" vs. "woman" differently than the women. Though the female referent remains constant, she is rated similarly (i.e., higher on evaluative scales) by males who heard "girl" and females

who head "woman." Also, she is rated similarly (i.e., lower) by males who heard "woman" and females who heard "girl."

This apparent semantic disparity, an inconsistency across gender in the manner in which these semantic variables are "fixed" during normal communication, could be critical to the comunication process. For instance, to pay a compliment to a female, a male college student might refer to her as "girl," only to discover she is dismayed or even angry at his "put down." At the same time, the feminist's preference for the non-sexist "woman" may lead to confusion, since this linguistic choice may have negative connotations to her well meaning but irritating male colleagues.

This semantic disparity seems to support traditional feminist assertions that an underlying imbalance exists in the way modern American society values men and women. Specifically, while women are presumably valued on the basis of their appearance and youth, with the corresponding devaluation of older and less attractive females, males are evaluated on the basis of their competence, ability and maturity. [15] The continuing discussion of the professional plight of the over-forty female television news anchor seems a cogent reflection of this problem.

The finding here that men evaluate "girls" higher than "women" could reflect this deep-rooted societal imbalance, an imbalance which is perhaps cultivated by language patterns used in television news. That these findings are seen in casual "reporting" calls out the need for further studies of how sexist language effects are incorporated into the lives of television news viewers.

Meanwhile, the main effects obtained by the use of male and female news anchors remains a perplexing one. That the female anchor would produce higher activity ratings of the lottery winner — "girl" or "woman" — was not anticipated. The newscasters used in this study were co-anchors of several years in the Columbus, Ohio, market. The female,

considered by many to be one of the best in the city, was in her late 30's. The male was greying and in his 50's.

Fortunately, the experiemental situation allowed collection of similar semantic differential ratings for the two anchors. ANOVA analysis of the evaluative, activity and potency data for both anchors revealed no significant differences for either subject gender or sexist language treatment groups. T-test comparisons of the subjects' ratings of male and female anchors did reveal one significant difference: the male anchor was viewed as more potent (strong, serious, hard) than the female anchor.

It is plausible that the main effects seen here may not be related to anchor gender, but to some other component in the viewers' assessment of the anchors. Deaux and Lewis suggest that, psychologically, our views and understanding of sexual roles are based on gender stereotypes, which are best described as a set or system of components. As we view and assess each other, the gender component of the stereotype can be outweighed by other components (role behavior, traits, etc.).[16] The main effects seen here may be related to some component in the viewers' assessment of the anchors, irrespective of gender. The finding may simply reflect a more lively delivery, or brighter disposition, for example.

Still, without further analysis it seems unwise to assume that the gender of the anchor played an insignificant role in the higher activity ratings given by the subjects.

In fact, several studies in advertising suggest gender of message source can have significant effects. A person's sexual identity, researchers Caballero and Soloman point out, is often the most obvious characteristic in social interaction.[17] In point of purchase advertising research, they tested the efficacy of photographed models in selling beer and paper tissues. The male display proved to be more effective in selling beer to men and women. The researchers concluded that consumers respond more readily to models portrayed consistently with the stereotypical view of the product category.

Several studies have found source (model) attractiveness can affect advertising effectiveness and audience persuasion. Baker and Churchill found ad effectiveness to be a function of source attractiveness, product type, and gender of message receiver. Males can be persuaded in part by a female model's attractiveness.[18] Widgery and Ruch found a message attributed to an attractive female more persuasive than one attributed to an unattrative one.[19] Joseph reports experimental research that found both male and female students were more readily persuaded by physically attractive males.[20]

Also, the perceived expertness of the message source may affect message impact, an effect which may interact with perceived attractiveness. Horai and associates concluded that sources who were inexpert but attractive were as effective as expert sources.[21] However, attractiveness and expertness were not "additive;" that is, expert sources who were also attractive were no more effective than experts who were unattractive.

It is reasonable to assume the female anchor may have been perceived as more attractive, or as more expert, than her male co-anchor. In support of this hypothesis, Joseph found that source expertness and attractiveness were more influential with open processing receivers than with closed and cautious ones.[22] Given the experimental environment in which the subjects were asked to view the news tape, subjects in this study were likely to be more open than closed, and therefore more susceptible to persuasion by an attractive or expert anchor.

Taken in conjunction with earlier discussion concerning society's valuation of females on the basis of youth and attractiveness, this analysis points to the need for further research regarding the effect of anchor characteristics (gender, attractiveness, expertness, etc.) on the impact and perception of newscasts. It will be especially important to investigate the interaction between anchor gender and the factors specifically affecting newscast impact.

For instance, one might hypothesize based on this discussion that the impact of female anchors would be more dependent on youth and attractiveness (which presumably

wane with age) than would the impact of male anchors, while the impact of male anchors would be more dependent on perceived maturity and expertness (which presumably wax with age) than would the impact of female anchors. Such findings would raise serious professional concerns for the plight of the female anchor.

Regardless, the fact remains that in this study the image conjured in the minds of television news viewers may have been affected by both content of the message, and characteristics of the anchorperson delivering the message. The question suggested by this research is that there may be significant anchor- and content-related factors which affect the newscast's impact on the viewer.

The attempt to understand this question may prove a worthwhile effort.

Summary

A sexist ("girl") and non-sexist ("woman") version of a television news story was presented to undergraduate sociology students as part of a two minute, 20 second sequence of local news stories. Both versions of the story were taped by male and female news anchors (message source). After viewing one of these four treatments, subjects (viewers) rated an adult female lottery winner described in one story (the referent) on evaluative, potency and activity semantic differential scales.

A general sexist language effect was not obtained as hypothesized.

However, women viewers rated the message referent lower on evaluative scales when the referent was called "girl" than when she was called "woman." Just the opposite was seen among male viewers, who rated the referent higher when she was called "girl." The results were seen as giving support to the notion that in American society (as reflected through, perhaps cultivated by, language patterns used in television news), there may exist

an underlying imbalance in the valuation of males and females. The results were also seen as indicative of a critical problem in communiation between the sexes, which fix the word-signals "girl" and "woman" differently and therefore bypass one another during the communication process.

An unanticipated finding came when subjects who viewed the female anchor rated the referent higher on activity scales than did those who viewed the male anchor. Research in advertising effectiveness suggests this finding may be a result of the perceived attractiveness or expertness of the female anchor relative to her male co-anchor, and that this effect may have been enhanced by the open processing of the viewers in an experimental environment.

Taken together, these findings raise the question of the affect of anchor gender and message content on the perceived status of persons described in television news.

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[13]The authors are grateful to Michelle Gailiun and Tom Ryan of WTVN-TV 6 in Columbus, Ohio.

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[18]Ibid.

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Appendix One:

Tables and Figures

i.

Table 1
Group Means for Osgood's "Evaluative" Dimension

	Male Broadcaster		Female Broadcaster	
	girl	*woman*	*girl*	*woman*
Male Subject	24.4 (N=10)	22.3 (11)	25.5 (17)	23.9 (14)
Female Subject	22.8 (14)	25.9 (11)	23.6 (7)	26.5 (8)

Table 2
ANOVA Summary for Osgood's "Evaluative" Dimension

Source of Variation	MS	df	F	p
Main Effects				
A. Sex of Broadcaster	36.248	1	1.149	n.s.
B. Sex of Subject	8.241	1	0.261	n.s.
C. Word (Girl vs. Woman)	1.704	1	0.054	n.s.
Interactions				
A X B	2.623	1	0.083	n.s.
A X C	0.259	1	0.008	n.s.
B X C	128.886	1	4.084	<.05
A X B X C	0.692	1	0.022	n.s.
Residual	31.556	84		

Figure 1
Plot of Group Means for Osgood's Evaluative Dimension
Controlling for Sex of Broadcaster

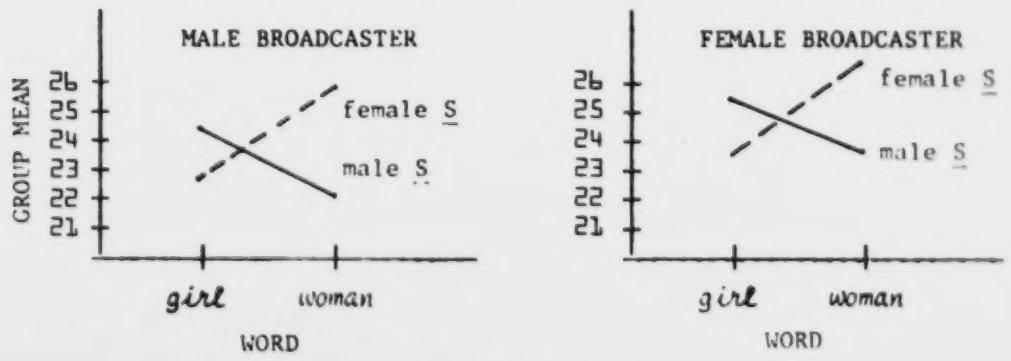


Table 3
Group Means for Osgood's "Potency" Dimension

	Male Broadcaster		Female Broadcaster	
	girl	*woman*	*girl*	*woman*
Male Subject	10.8 (10)	10.6 (11)	12.1 (17)	11.9 (14)
Female Subject	11.2 (14)	10.9 (11)	12.0 (7)	11.9 (8)

Table 4
ANOVA Summary for Osgood's "Potency" Dimension

Source of Variation	MS	df	F	p
Main Effects				
A. Sex of Broadcaster	27.402	1	3.780	n.s.
B. Sex of Subject	0.460	1	0.063	n.s.
C. Word (Girl vs. Woman)	1.119	1	0.154	n.s.
Interactions				
A X B	0.984	1	0.136	n.s.
A X C	0.021	1	0.003	n.s.
B X C	0.011	1	0.001	n.s.
A X B X C	0.056	1	0.008	n.s.
Residual	7.250	84		

Figure 2
Plot of Group Means for Osgood's Potency Dimension
Controlling for Sex of Broadcaster

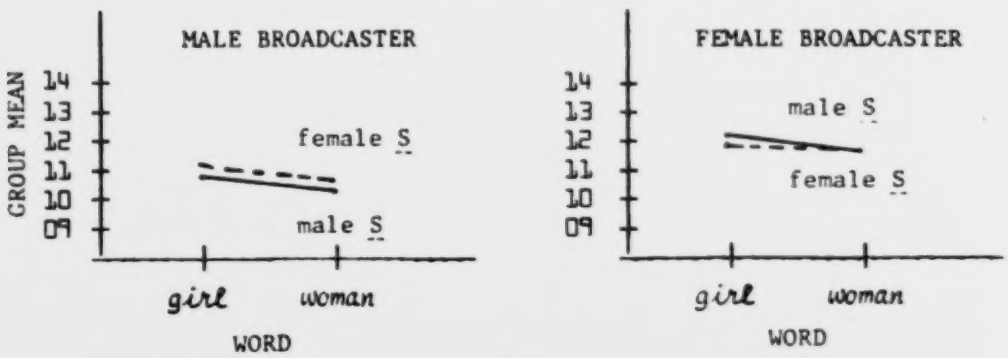


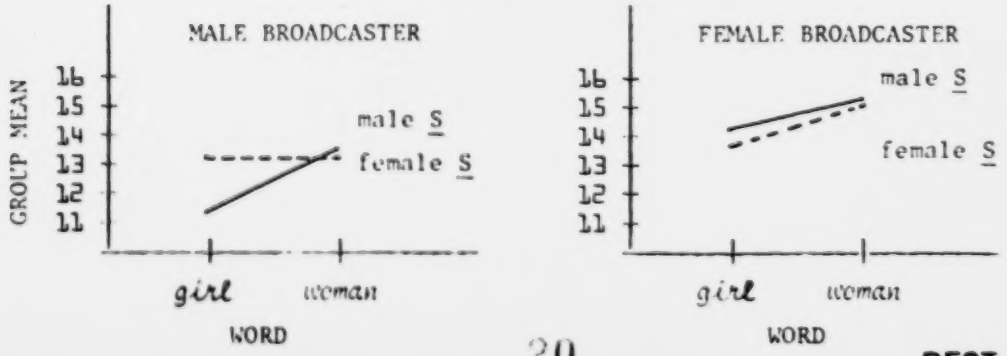
Table 5
Group Means for Osgood's "Activity" Dimension

	Male Broadcaster		Female Broadcaster	
	girl	*woman*	*girl*	*woman*
Male Subject	11.5 (10)	13.7 (11)	14.2 (17)	15.1 (14)
Female Subject	13.3 (14)	13.3 (11)	13.7 (7)	14.9 (8)

Table 6
ANOVA Summary for Osgood's "Activity" Dimension

Source of Variation	MS	df	F	p
Main Effects				
A. Sex of Broadcaster	52.378	1	6.553	<.05
B. Sex of Subject	0.994	1	0.124	n.s.
C. Word (Girl vs. Woman)	21.136	1	2.644	n.s.
Interactions				
A X B	5.361	1	0.671	n.s.
A X C	0.371	1	0.046	n.s.
B X C	6.027	1	0.754	n.s.
A X B X C	8.358	1	1.046	n.s.
Residual	7.993	84		

Figure 3
Plot of Group Means for Osgood's Activity Dimension
Controlling for Sex of Broadcaster



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